

# The Fort Myers Fishbowl Forum

By Michael Simmons and Mysha Clarke, NRLI Class XX Fellows

After a few months apart, we were eager and excited to reunite with our masked NRLI Class XX Fellows in Fort Myers, home of progressive thinkers Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. As we shuffled our chairs to be at least six feet apart we understood the importance of our convening and enjoyed the presence, masked smiles, and muffled check-ins and greetings of the other Fellows waving to each other. The welcoming breeze, lush tree canopy, and soft grass that hugged our feet outside the hotel provided an excellent backdrop for critically thinking about south Florida's water quality issues with a focus on group dynamics and facilitation. Session 5 harnessed the non-virtual excitement and energy of the NRLI class and instructors to build upon the facilitation foundation from the past session.

One of the major "hidden" themes for Session 5 was perspective. In order to progress forward, a wise path is to revisit previous steps taken. Session 5 began with Fellows reviewing each of our sessions thus far. From shy and nervous beginnings in Gainesville in an unknown COVID-19 world, to fishing offshore in the Panhandle, to the virtual holiday sessions, Class XX members have started to incorporate our past lessons on the roots of conflict, perception and bias, framing, power, participation, and facilitation to improve productivity and collaboration.

Many of us have found ourselves in meetings where there is a stagnant feeling where you can't push past an obstacle or issue. We have experienced those meetings where in the back of our minds, we find ourselves with thoughts and comments such as: "what a waste of time; why are we talking about this again; this is stupid." During this session in NRLI, we learned that this is called the "Groan Zone", and is a necessary and sometimes unavoidable part of facilitation and group dynamics. To avoid or push through the Groan Zone, facilitators need to be keenly aware of facilitative functions. Those being task functions and maintenance functions. Taking care of these roles will help keep a group peddling out and away from the groan zone. Ahhh, I remember how awful those parts of the meetings were but now that we know the "Groan Zone" is a scholarly term, it is actually normal and acceptable when placed in context and acknowledged by facilitators and participants.



Task and maintenance roles in facilitation also hinge on perspective. As a facilitator, one needs to be cognizant of meeting purposes, tasks to achieve, clarify tasks and thoughts, summarize, build consensus, and record discussion and important points. While focusing on these task roles, a facilitator needs to maintain perspective of their group and apply appropriate maintenance techniques, such as encouragement, harmonization, compromising, and gatekeeping.



In Session 5, Class XX Fellows discovered a method for understanding these roles through role playing using the "Fishbowl Technique" really enjoyed getting into their diplomatic, obnoxious, introverted, extroverted, skeptical or "know-it-all" characters in this role-playing exercise. While it was fun, it quickly became apparent that the types of roles played coincide with personality types found in many group meetings. For those acting out the character in the middle of the circle or fishbowl, those spectators standing outside the fishbowl observing, it was clear to understand how these personality types interact with each other, hinder the process (or help), and how easy it is to find yourself in the "Groan Zone". At the end of Session 5, Fellows learned how to perceive these personalities by focusing on the purpose (tasks) of the meeting and on maintenance roles to reduce potential conflict, build trust and positive thinking, and to divert away from unproductive groan zone moments.

The skills we are developing through the NRLI forum are ever more important in this new world we find ourselves in. With less in-person social interactions and more virtual settings, these skills have an ever-growing importance in fostering productive meetings, managing conflict, encouraging participation, and improving the natural resources we all manage and care about throughout Florida....and beyond. Due to the tireless efforts of our NRLI facilitators, who continue to find safe and productive locations for our sessions, our NRLI journey will continue to our next stop. According to an Irish blessing, "May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind be always at your back..." We look forward to travelling and reconvening in Palatka, FL on March 17.